

SE-39

This is a provisional estimate. The subjects herein treated will be discussed at greater length in NIE-65: Soviet Bloc Capabilities through 1957.

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

9 March 1953

SUBJECT: SE-39: PROBABLE CONSEQUENCES OF THE DEATH OF STALIN
AND OF THE ELEVATION OF MALENKOV TO LEADERSHIP
SHIP IN THE USSR

I. THE INITIAL TRANSFER OF AUTHORITY

1. The problem of transfer of power is one of the most difficult which the Soviet system could face. The important initial step, the formal transfer of authority, has apparently been effected with remarkable rapidity and precision. The smoothness of the transfer of authority to Malenkov and the speed with which the Government and Party posts were filled, suggest an acute awareness on the part of the Soviet leaders of the dangers inherent in the situation. *

2. Malenkov's key position in the Soviet Communist Party throughout the past fourteen years, his conspicuous and apparently planned elevation since 1948, his prominent role at and since the 19th Party Congress, and the accolade accorded him by Beria at Stalin's funeral suggest that there will be no immediate challenge to his authority. However, we cannot estimate whether he has the

* In the new organization, Malenkov apparently now holds the same commanding position within the Presidium and the Secretariat of the Party and in the Council of Ministers which Stalin held. In the Council of Ministers, power has been concentrated in the hands of Malenkov as Chairman and four First Deputy Chairmen: Beria, Molotov, Bulganin, and Kaganovich. These five make up the Presidium of the Council of Ministers, a body that in nature and membership closely parallels the wartime Committee of State Defense under Stalin. The concentration of power has been increased, and the top party and government organs have been reduced in number and in size. The new organization of Party and Government and the extensive reorganization and merger of several major industries under Malenkov appear to tighten and streamline the administrative system.

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qualities necessary to consolidate his position and to attain unchallenged power, since he has always operated with the backing of Stalin. Neither is it possible to estimate with confidence the capabilities or probable courses of action of his possible opponents.

3. A struggle for power could develop within the Soviet hierarchy at any time. Given the nature of the Soviet state, such a struggle would probably be carried on within the Party organization. In any case, the peoples of the USSR are unlikely to participate actively in the struggle. Even if a struggle should break out in the near future, we believe that the hold of the Communist Party over the USSR is not likely to be shaken during the next year. We do not believe that such a struggle would in itself lead the rulers of the USSR deliberately to initiate general war.

II. PROBABLE CONSEQUENCES OF DEATH OF STALIN

A. Probable Future Soviet Policies

4. In the near future, the new Soviet leadership will almost certainly attempt to follow the foreign and domestic policies established during recent years. It will probably continue to emphasize unrelenting hostility to the West, the enlargement of the Bloc economic base, and the increase of Bloc military power.

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5. The death of Stalin removes an autocrat who, while ruthless and determined to spread Soviet power, did not allow his ambitions to lead him into reckless courses of action in his foreign policy. It would be unsafe to assume that the new Soviet regime will have Stalin's skill in avoiding general war. At least initially, the regime will also lack his freedom of action and his ability to manoeuvre, since it will not possess Stalin's immense prestige and authority. Specifically, in foreign policy, the new regime will probably find it more difficult to abandon positions than did Stalin and might feel itself compelled to react more strongly to what it regarded as new aggressive moves of the West. If the West should suggest re-examination of the principal issues which have divided East and West, the new Soviet Government would probably adhere to established Soviet positions.

6. The new Soviet regime probably fears that, while it is in the process of consolidating its power, the West may make aggressive moves against the Bloc. It would probably view with extreme suspicion any new moves made by the West, particularly those involving long-range air forces or military forces close to the Bloc frontiers.

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B. Probable Effects upon the Peoples of the USSR

7. The death of Stalin removes the man who had been built up to the status of a demi-god. To many of the people of the USSR, he was the man of steel who had raised Russia to industrial and military power, who withstood the German attack, and who led the peoples of the USSR to the greatest military victory in Russian history. Stalin's death will be a psychological shock to large numbers of Soviet people. However, we estimate that the psychological shock will not significantly affect the strength or the effectiveness of the new regime.

C. Probable Effect upon the Bloc and the International Communist Movement

8. For some time, no successor to Stalin will be able to achieve comparable status or similar significance as a symbol of the international Communist movement and as the undisputed leader of world Communism. Therefore, the cohesion of the Communist movement outside the Bloc may be impaired, at least temporarily. If there should be a struggle for power within the Soviet Communist Party, the cohesion of the Communist movement outside the Bloc would almost certainly be weakened.

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9. Kremlin control over the European Satellites is so firm that we do not believe it will be impaired by the death of Stalin. However, in the unlikely event that a struggle in the Soviet Communist Party should spread to the Soviet Army and the Soviet Security Forces, Soviet control over the Satellites would almost certainly be shaken.

10. Relations between Tito and Moscow are unlikely to change as a result of the death of Stalin. The antagonism was not purely personal, but arose from a genuine clash of Yugoslav national interests with the Soviet Communist Party. Moreover, both sides have taken actions and adopted positions which would be extremely difficult to reverse. The Kremlin could not recognize Tito as an independent Communist ally without undermining its position with the European Satellites.

11. We do not believe that Tito's influence within the Satellites or within Communist Parties outside the Bloc will increase, unless there should be a prolonged struggle for power in the USSR.

12. We believe that Stalin's death will have no immediate effect upon Sino-Soviet cooperation or upon Chinese Communist foreign policies. However, no successor to Stalin will have prestige and

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authority in Asia comparable to his. The stature of Mao as leader and theoretician of Asian Communism will inevitably increase with the disappearance of the former supreme leader. Mao will almost certainly have more influence in the determination of Bloc policy affecting Asia. He almost certainly will not seek leadership of the international Communist movement. The new Moscow leadership will probably deal cautiously with Mao; if it does not, serious strains in Sino-Soviet relations will almost certainly develop.

III. PROBABLE WESTERN REACTION TO DEATH OF STALIN AND ELEVATION OF MALENKOV

13. We believe that in general the Western European leaders will be disposed for the time being to conduct the East-West struggle with greater hesitancy and caution. They will probably fear that any immediate Western pressure on the Bloc would increase the danger of war and facilitate the stabilization of authority in the USSR. They will also probably hope that, if Western pressure is not exerted, the problems involved in the consolidation of the authority of the new regime of the USSR will bring about at least a temporary relaxation of tensions and enable them to postpone disagreeable policy decisions.

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